MYSTERIOUS VIMAYAPURA the ancient Khmer city in Thailand

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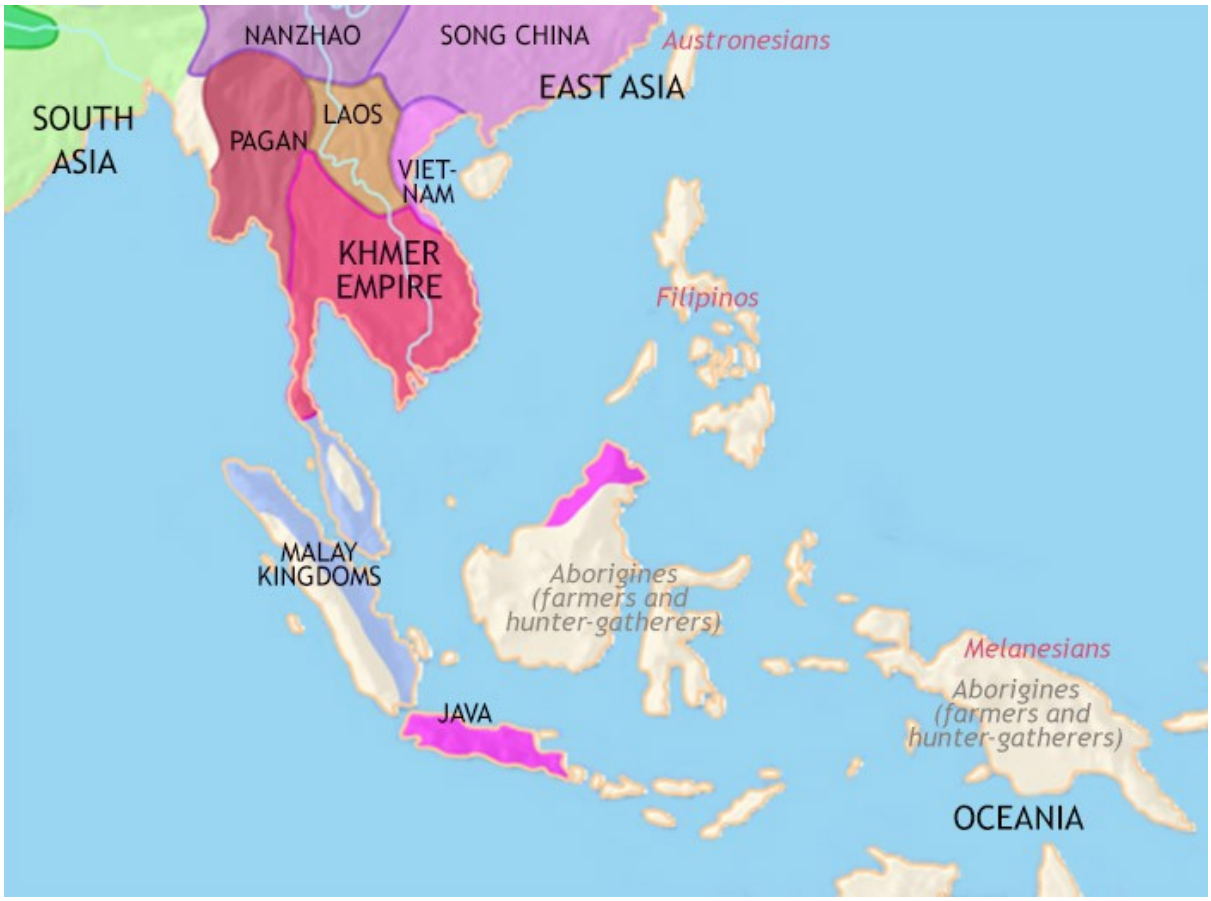
Southeast Asia's dominant Khmer civilisation which flourished from the beginning of the ninth century till the mid-fifteenth century CE. Khmer's greatest monument, Angkor Wat, was a culmination of centuries of temple building, design innovation and artistic refinement, which was first experimented on smaller temples. One such temple was located at Vimayapura, a frontier town in today's Nakhon Ratchasima province in northeast Thailand. This is important because ancient Angkor is not just a single city in Cambodia, but a collection of cities scattered over Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand. Many other cities dotted the landscape-identified today only by the stone structures of Stupas and Temples that remain,the rest gone to dust due to the life span extinction of their building materials.



What is happening in South East Asia in 1215 CE? The Sri Vijaya empire hasvanished, to be replaced by numerous kingdoms in Malaya, Java and Sumatra. The dominant power in the region is now the Khmer empire, which is based in Cambodia but has conquered the historic kingdom of Champa and has expanded over a huge empire. This is the age in which the great series of Khmer temples were built, culminating in Angkor Wat.

- **Phnom Kulen**

- **Preah Khan of Kampong Svay**
- **Beng Mealea**
- **The Ancient City of Koh Ker**
- **Banteay Chhmar**
- **Prasat Preah Vihear**
- **Kompong Thom: Sambor Prei Kuk**
- **Oudong**
- **Kampot and Kep**
- **Bokor National Park**

Cities

Name	Province	Image
Phnom Penh	**Phnom Penh**	
Siem Reap	**Siem Reap**	
Battambang	**Battambang**	

Name	Province	Image
Serei Saophoan	**Banteay Meanchey**	
Poipet	**Banteay Meanchey**	
Ta Khmau	**Kandal**	
Sihanoukville	**Sihanoukville**	

Name	Province	Image
Samraong	**Oddar Meanchey**	
Pursat	**Pursat**	
Stueng Saen	**Kampong Thom**	
Chbar Mon	**Kampong Speu**	

Name	Province	Image
Bavet	**Svay Rieng**	
Doun Kaev	**Takéo**	
Svay Rieng	**Svay Rieng**	
Kampong Chhnang	**Kampong Chhnang**	

Name	Province	Image
Kampong Cham	**Kampong Cham**	
Pailin	**Pailin**	
Prey Veng	**Prey Veng**	
Suong	**Tboung Khmum**	

Name	Province	Image
Kampot	**Kampot**	
Banlung	**Ratanakiri**	
Khemarak Phoumin	**Koh Kong**	
Kratié	**Kratié**	

Name	Province	Image
Preah Vihear	**Preah Vihear**	
Sen Monorom	**Mondulkiri**	
Kep	**Kep**	
Koh Rong[4]	**Sihanoukville**	

These cities or better their ancient counterparts were connected to each other by a network of royal highways that allowed easy transport and human migration. Vimayapura was located on one of the longest highways—250 km—connecting Angkor's capital at Yashodharapura to the Khorat Plateau. Many temples and *arogyashala*s (hospitals) dot this strategic route, including at Phanom Rung, Prasat Muang Kao, Prasat Huay Khaen, Prasat Muang Tam and Prasat Phanom Wan. The road continued further west to Lopburi, a major outpost of Angkor in the Chao Phraya River basin. Later becoming a provincial capital. The dominant culture at Angkor was Hindu, centered around veneration of the Devaraja (god-king) which manifested in a royal lingam. Buddhism, though widely practiced by the population and even by some

rulers, did not enjoy the same patronage as Hindu cults. It is possible the Mahidharapura dynasty did not want to break from the long-established Hindu traditions, hence though they commissioned a Buddhist shrine, it retained the iconography and design principles of a Hindu temple.

More structures were added by the next king Dharanindravarman I (r. 1107–12 CE). His successor, Suryavarman II (r. 1113–50 CE), expanded the empire and reunited political authority at Angkor. He patronised the Hindu god Vishnu, to whom he dedicated Angkor Wat, the largest religious monument in the world. Suryavarman II was greatly impressed by the graceful lotus form of the shikara at Vimayapura Temple and used that template for the five central towers at Angkor Wat, built in the same century, a few decades later. Jayavarman VII (r. 1181–1218 CE), the first king to majorly patronise Buddhism in Angkor, commissioned two towers flanking the Vimaya Temple. A devout Buddhist, he had a statue of himself installed in the temple, now shifted to the Phimai Museum. He also constructed 17 arogyashalas (hospitals) along the royal highway. Jayavarman VII's reign saw hectic building activity, but in doing so, he had overstretched the resources of the empire, and Angkor saw a steady decline by the mid-thirteenth century.

This period of Angkor's slow decline also saw the emergence of the Tai people as strong challengers to Angkor's authority in the Chao Phraya River basin. The Sukhothai kingdom rebelled against Angkor, and Vimayapura was later absorbed within the Ayuthhaya kingdom. Unfortunately for Angkor, the Thais used the same highway network to make repeated raids on Angkor's capital, which, in 1431 CE, was shifted further south, and thereafter the empire survived as a rump state. With Angkor's decline, Vimayapura also suffered a decline, and the temple was abandoned. The site was destroyed in a raid made by Laotians in the nineteenth century.

It was during the period of Thai rule that Vimayapura was renamed Phimai, and the temple was termed a *prasat* (palace). In 1964, a new museum was built in Phimai town to store artefacts recovered from the temple site. Between 1964–69, the Royal Thai Government and French archaeologists jointly restored the damaged shikara by the anastylosis method. In 1976, the Fine Arts Department undertook a restoration project of the temple site and historical structures in Phimai town, and the Phimai Historical Park was officially inaugurated by Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn on April 12, 1989.

Vimayapura but came into relevance in the late eleventh century when a power base was established there by Jayavarman VI (r. 1080–1107 CE). Jayavarman VI was not a legitimate claimant to the throne but had usurped it from Harshavarman III (r. 1066–80

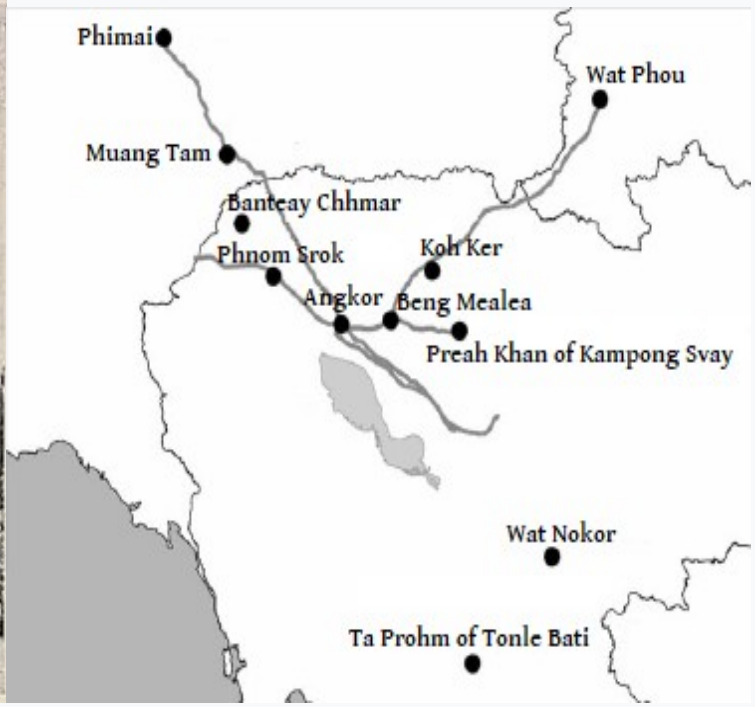
CE), whose reign was fraught with internal rebellions and war with the Chams. This brought a new dynasty to power, and, for a period, Angkor was probably ruled simultaneously by two dynasties: one from the capital at Yashodharapura and the other from Vimayapura. This new dynasty, Mahidharapura, produced many later kings, including Suryavarman II, the builder of Angkor Wat, and Jayavarman VII. Vimayapura's name is derived from Vimaya, a Sanskrit word meaning 'one who has overcome the desire of *maya* (the illusion/misperception of reality)', referring to the Buddha.

Vimayapura was not located in the heart of the empire, but far away, bordering the Mon kingdoms at Haripunjaya (modern Lamphun) and Lavo (modern Lopburi). Vimayapura's location may have played a key role in how the new dynasty patronised religion. From the sixth century onwards, the Khorat Plateau was part of Dwaravati kingdom, which had developed a highly syncretic culture through longstanding contact and trade with India, Sri Lanka and Myanmar. Both Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism was widely followed by the largely Mon-speaking population of Dwaravati, which finds a mention in the memoirs of Xuan Zhang, the Chinese monk who travelled to India from China in the seventh century.

Jayavarman VI commissioned a temple to enshrine an image of the Buddha. Conceived as a Vajrayana Buddhist shrine, the temple had Tantric elements and other esoteric forms, never seen at Angkor thereafter. An inscription on a doorjamb of the southern gopuram mention a local chieftain, Virendradhipativarman, installing an image of the Vajrayana Buddhist deity Trailokyavijaya in 1108 CE. The presence of Vajrayana and Tantric elements make the Vimayapura Temple unique amongst Angkor's temples, which till that point were exclusively Hindu. The original Buddha image—mentioned in inscriptions as Kamarateng Jagata Vimaya—is now on display at the Phimai Museum.

Now a part of the **Phimai Historical Park** in Thailand, it is located in the town of Phimai, Nakhon Ratchasima province. It is one of the most important tourist attractions in Nakhon Ratchasima province.

Phimai had previously been an important town at the time. The temple Prasat Hin Phimai, located in the center ancient Thailand, connected with by an Highway, and oriented to face Angkor as its cardinal direction. The site is now protected as the Phimai Historical Park.



The central sanctum-tower in 1968….Map of ancient Highways. See Phimai at the TOP

The temple marks one end of the Ancient Khmer Highway from Angkor. As the enclosed area of 1020x580m is comparable with that of Angkor Wat, it is suggested to have been an important city in the Khmer Empire. Most buildings are from the late 11th to the late 12th century, built in the Baphuon, Bayon and Khmer temple style. However, even though the Khmer at that time were Hindu, the temple was built as a Buddhist temple, since the inhabitants of the Khorat area had been Buddhists as far back as the 7th century. Inscriptions name the

site *Vimayapura* (which means city of *Vimaya*), which developed into the Thai name *Phimai*.

In the aftermath of the fall of the Ayutthaya Kingdom in 1767, attempts were made to set up five separate states, with Prince Teppipit, a son of King Borommakot, attempting to establish Phimai as one, ruling over eastern provinces including Nakhon Ratchasima. As the weakest of the five, Prince Teppipit was the first to be defeated and was executed in 1768.

The first inventory of the ruins was done in 1901 by the French geographer Etienne Aymonier. The site was put under Thai governmental protection by announcement in the Government Gazette, Volume 53, section 34, on September 27, 1936. Most of the restorations were done from 1964 to 1969 as a joint Thai-French project. The historical park, now managed by the Fine Arts Department, was officially opened by Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn on April 12, 1989.

Phimai has recently been the base of operations for the excavation of Ban Non Wat.

Khmer influence-As the northeastern part of Thailand was part of the Khmer Empire (once ruled by the Khmer, modern day Cambodia), Phimai's architecture and cultural decorations were built in Khmer architecture. Art and architecture shown on the temple itself shows great evidence of the ancient Khmer civilization. Similar in its look and design to Angkor, it also has the same function for worshiping the gods in the Hindu religion.

Despite the fact that Phimai was built in a similar fashion to Angkor and other Khmer Buddhist temples, the religious origin of some structures within Phimai's walls are still debated. Evidence of Dvaravati influence, such as the sculpture of "the Wheel of Law" or the statue of Buddha, shows that Phimai was an important Buddhist spiritual location. Although a large quantity of Buddhist artwork has been uncovered in Phimai, evidence including the large pots that were embedded in some corners of the structure suggest that spiritual practices other than Buddhism were also practiced in Phimai. Phimai thus has been an important religious landmark for Animists, Buddhists, and Hindus.

The earliest engraved records of the Khmer is dated from the 6th century AD in the northeast of Thailand. For example, stone Sanskrit inscriptions were found along with statues and engraved images of Hindu deities, such as the image of Shiva's bull Nandin. The king during that time, Mahendravarman, ordered his men to obliterate the engraved inscription. Modern scholars debate about the possibility that evidence may have been lost.

Phimai, along with other Khmer temples in Thailand, were built mainly under the cause of the "Deveraja cult," or "the King that resembles a god." Jayavarman II was the most mentioned "devaraja." The Devaraja cult developed the belief of worshiping Shiva and the principle that the king was an avatar of Shiva. Under this principle, Khmer rulers built

temples to glorify the reign of the king along with the spread of Hinduism.

The 10th century was the time of the reign of king Rajendravarman II (944-968 AD), which was also a time when Khmer control was spreading into what is now northeastern Thailand. Consequently, temples in Thailand with the Kleang and Baphuon styles remain as evidence of this Khmer heritage. These structures shared the same signature of having three brick towers on a single platform, for instance the Prasat Prang Ku in Si Saket province and Ban Phuluang in Surin province.

Each individual building has its own special features or functions. For example, Prang Brahmadat was built of laterite blocks that form a square. Or Prang Hin Daeng which translates to "Red Stone Tower" which is also a square but was made of red sandstone. Or the main sanctuary built of white sandstone that is almost 32 meters long. The southern lintel has a statue of Buddha meditating with "seven hoods of naga Muchalinda." Adjacent to this is a collection of statues of devils and animals depicted from the Tantric Mahayana Buddhist scripture.

Today Phimai is a well-known tourist attraction, especially among people interested in history and archaeology. Located in the middle of Phimai is a small rectangular gallery surrounding the courtyard, which has been newly rebuilt. Within the gallery there is a pre-Angkorian Buddhist inscription that tells the story of prince Siddhartha Gautama and his journey to becoming Buddha, along with other classic Buddhist stories. The *prang* symbolize that the area is a sacred space.

Phimai historical park

When tourists enter the area of Phimai from the old town on the south, they have to cross a river about one kilometer to the south and enter an ancient laterite landing stage which archaeologists believe stood for the bathing place for the heroine in local myths. The south gate is the city main gate, also known as the "Pratu Chai," which has recently been reconstructed by the Royal Fine Arts Department. Its size is enormous; it is said that the size is big enough for a royal elephant to enter. The Royal Fine Arts Department also built an inner gallery which shows ancient Buddhist inscriptions and small sculptures as well as pieces of wrecked architecture. The rest of Phimai remains the same only with a little restoration by the Royal Arts Department.

Architecture style

Having a lot in common with Angkor Wat, Phimai is an example of classical Khmer architecture. Ancient Khmer architects were best known for their superior use of sandstone over the traditional bricks and laterite architectures. Sandstone is used on the visible outer layer. Laterite on the other hand was used for the inner wall and other hidden parts. All the structures are huge sandstone blocks. There are many lotus-shaped roofs representing Mount Meru (Hinduism's holy mountain).

Khmer temples in general, as well as Phimai in this case, were intended to resemble the universe. The main building resembles the peak of Mount Meru at the center of the universe. The surrounding walls resemble the water and encircling mountains. The Khmer did not develop the technique of true vault architecture during their time, results in large areas at Phimai that could not be roofed over. They instead developed the use of multiple chapels separated by open-air spaces. Within the gallery there is a pre-Angkorian Buddhist inscription that tells the story of prince Siddhartha Gautama and his journey to becoming Buddha, along with other classic Buddhist stories. The *prang* symbolize that the area is a sacred space.

Angkor Wat and Phimai have several architectural similarities and are examples of classical Khmer architecture. Ancient Khmer architects were best known for their superior use of sandstone over the traditional bricks and laterite architectures. Sandstone is used on the visible outer layer. Laterite on the other hand was used for the inner wall and other hidden parts. All the structures are huge sandstone blocks. There are many lotus-shaped roofs representing Mount Meru (Hinduism's holy mountain).

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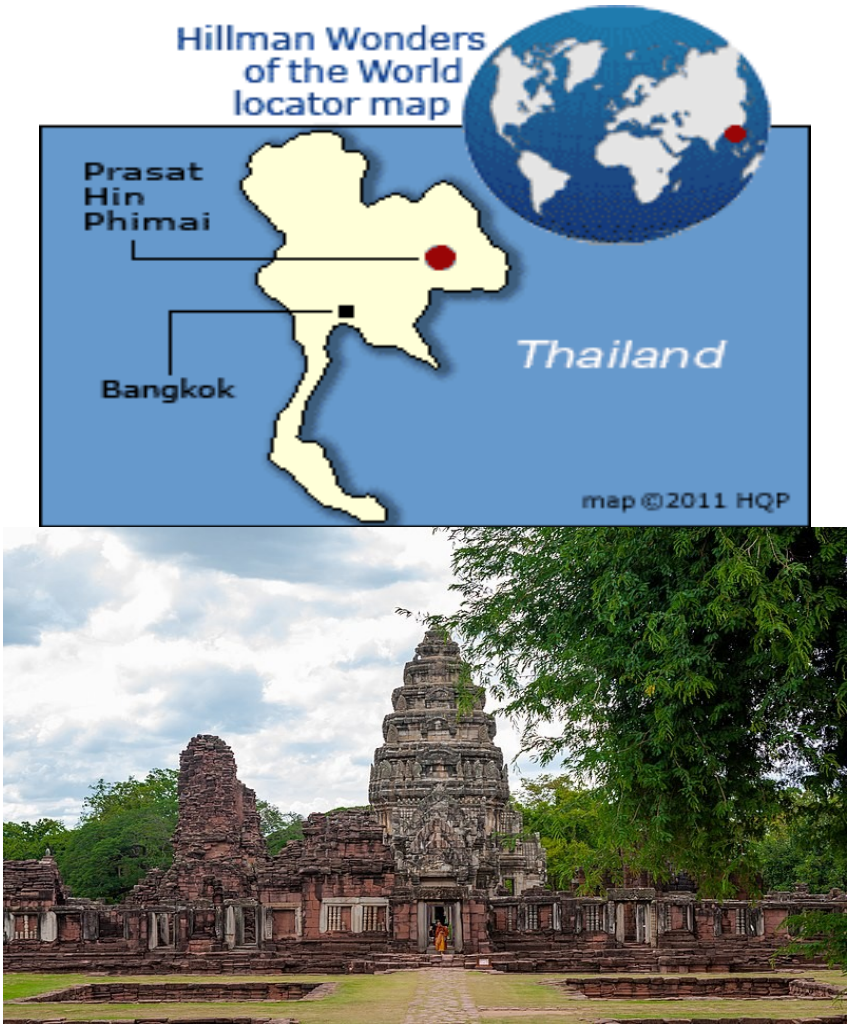
Construction Materials

The Khmer learned how to use bricks, sandstone, and laterite effectively. They were the three principal structural materials. Builders generally cut the lintel at 45 degrees to produce a triangular wedge.In 1998, the *Origins of Angkor Project* (OAP), a joint project of the Royal Thai Fine Arts Department, Anthropology Department, and the University of Otago, New Zealand, began excavations to investigate the underlying sequence. Temple construction during the Angkorian period involved the deliberate deposition of layers of fill, which can clearly be seen in the stratigraphy of the site.

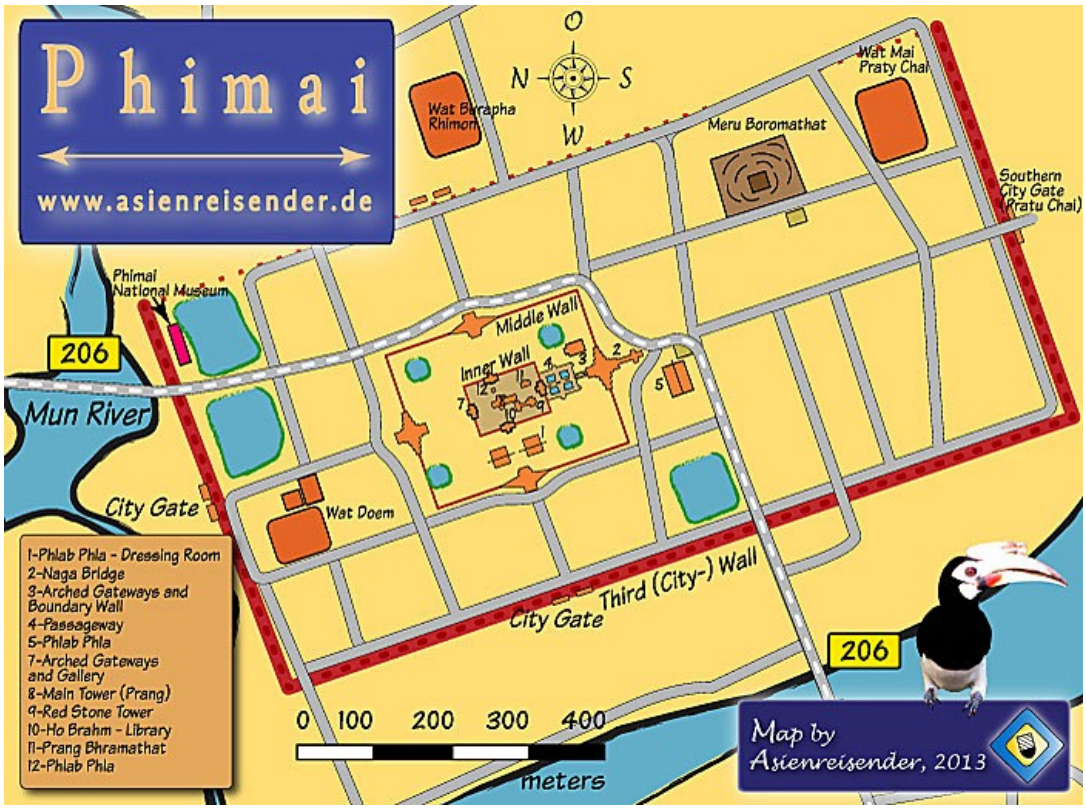


In the heart of Phimai, a small town in Thailand's northeastern Isan region, one of the most remarkable Angkorean cultural heritages outside Angkor itself is situated: Prasat Phimai. In 1936 it was set under protection by the Thai government and became step by step restored from the 1950s on. 'Phimai Historical Park' was opened in 1989.

The main tower (prang) of the inner sanctuary of Phimai.
Phimai town is a medieval Khmer foundation, became the first time fortificated in the 11th century and advanced to a spiritual center of the classical empire of Angkor. In the reign of king Jayavarman VII (1181-1206/1220 CE) the city walls and gates so far they remain now were constructed. The town's name is derivated fro 'Vimayapura' or 'Vimai'. The contemporary official name of the site is 'Prasat Hin Phi Mai'.

Historical Phimai has a considerable size. The inner temple district is a rectangular of 83m to 74m, the middle district measures 272m to 220m and the surrounding town, which was formerly completely enclosed by the city wall, stretches over 665m to 1033m. Phimai must have been one of the most important cities in the Angkorean empire.
The central temple complex is not exactly aligned onto the north-south axis, but by 20 degree turned to southeast. It's probably done to give it the direction facing to Angkor.
At the northern end of Phimai is a national museum placed, which displays a number of the site's artefacts as lintels, Buddha images, nagas, pottery and jewellery.
Prasat Phimai is considered to be the most important Khmer monument in Thailand.

Map of Phimai



Phimai is a particularly inviting Thai town for it's marvellous combination of a lively place in combination with a great historical site. Few tourists or travellers take their time to study the place for a few days, although it offers a friendly atmosphere in a spot where is much to do. Besides the main site various Thai temples are to visit in Phimai, three markets offer opportunities to buy food and other supplies, there is the Mun River to have walks along it's banks and a 350 years old huge Banyan tree not far east of town. The surrounding is coined by rice paddies showing traditional Thai life style and there are other archeological sites not far around. Accommodation and individual transport (bicycles and motorbikes) are easy to organize.

History

Erection of the site started in the reign of king Suriyavarman I (1002-1049), but most of the buildings were built between the late 11th and the late 12th century. They clearly represent Angkor Wat style, partially Bayon and Baphuon style. There was an older sanctuary at the spot already; as a Khmer place it's a century younger than the neighbouring site of Phanom Rung. 800 years ago this park used to be the start of the ancient Khmer Highway which ended in Angkor Wat.

The king's 'dressing house', called 'Phlab Phla' in Khmer language

The central temple complex of Phimai

Although Hinduism was the main religion of Angkor at this time, also Buddhism and Animism were practised in Wat Phimai. Though, Hinduism is clearly the paradigmatic religion praised in Phimai's architecture. Having much in common with Angkor Wat, it reflects the Hindu cosmos with the sacred Mount Meru in the center. There is also a greater barray (artificial Khmer pool) east of the place, traditionally symbolizing the sea. The Mun River and two canals then complete the enclosement of the place by waterways.

Though, Phimai paid tribute to the religion of Mahayana Buddhism. It's also due to the influence of king Jayavarman VII, who was Angkor's first Buddhist king (very much represented in Angkor Thom's Bayon monument), that Phimai became a sanctuary focussed on the new state religion.
The building materials are the same as the Khmer always used, provided by the surrounding quarrels in the region: different kinds of sandstone and laterite, supplemented by the usage of bricks.

In two old stone inscriptions Phimai is mentioned in connection with king Jayavarman VI and described at situated at an endpoint of a 225km road which led (via Phanom Rung) to the empires capital Angkor and it's state temple Angkor Wat. The route was used by travellers and pilgrims as well as by military troops. It was equipped with seventeen resthouses, and some hospitals. The remains of these resthouses and hospitals still mark a 150km part of the old road. This imperial road to Angkor starts at the southern gate of Phimai, which is therefore the main gate and still the main entrance for the site nowadays.

Zhou Daguan (Chou Ta-Kuan), the Chinese envoy who spent a year in Angkor in 1296/97, mentioned Phimai in his famous report.

In the second district of the site, facing the gallery with the main prang behind

Phimai had previously been an important town at the time of the Khmer Empire. The temple Prasat Hin Phimai, located in the center of the town, was one of the major Khmer temples in ancient Thailand, connected with Angkor by an ancient Khmer Highway, and oriented to face Angkor as its cardinal direction.

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